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THE NOVEL & OUR TIME

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Alex Comfort



THE NOVEL & OUR TIME

London



1948

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CONTENTS

1	<i>Writing for an Asocial Society</i>	7
2	<i>The Concept of Responsibility</i>	17
3	<i>The Mechanics of Patronage</i>	27
4	<i>The Angle of Narration</i>	33
5	<i>Violence, Sadism, and Miss Blandish</i>	44
6	<i>Realism, Fantasy, and Symbolism</i>	58
7	<i>Conclusion</i>	75

1 · Writing for an Asocial Society

IN THIS BOOK I AM TRYING TO PRESENT, NOT for critics but for readers, one or two of the critical and technical problems arising out of the novel in its present setting. I will keep off its history, except insofar as that is essential in discussing the intention of the novel in general, and I do not feel qualified to discuss individual contemporaries at length. If I make it clear at the outset that I am speaking entirely for myself that may prevent misunderstanding of the general thesis behind my criticism. Since every writer is bound to be influenced by all that he reads, from Tolstoy to Maria Monk, whether he likes it or not, schools of literature are at best confessions of indebtedness between friends, and at worst discreditable rackets. One of the few compensations which individualism in art has to offer for the loss of a human conception of creative work is the freedom to mould literature to one's own personality, and I am going to suggest that this is more true of the novel and the lyrical poem than of any other forms of verbal art. Now that a writer's attitude to humanity and history is increasingly his most important artistic quality there is more reason for the reader to demand personal accounts of what takes place in the process of writing than in social patterns of society where he shares with the writer the making of what is written.

My own position is that of romanticism, which I have discussed elsewhere and tried to define in such a

way that realism as a novelistic quality is not made an antithetic quality to it. For me, romanticism implies a belief that humanity, by virtue of the development of autonomous mind, is in a constant state of conflict with the external universe; a conflict, in face of the human instinct for survival, with death, and with those members of the human race who have lost their nerve and sided with death against man: the advocates of power. The main literary and ethical conclusions of this view are that human standards, beauty, justice, and so on, exist only so long as we assert them, but are none the less valid for that; and the main ethical value is a sense of biological human responsibility, against death and against power. Quite clearly, this kind of anarcho-humanism will not meet with everyone's agreement, and I am not attempting to demonstrate it here, but it is a viewpoint which has already figured largely in literature.

The critical importance of a writer's opinions is this: if their scope is insufficient to cover the material he deals with, and to cover it in a coherent manner, irrespective of their immediate truth, they may render him unable to write at the level which, by common agreement, we call major literature. I put this view in direct opposition to the contention that it is the 'correctness' of a writer's opinions (*i.e.* his conformity with those of the critic) which determine his artistic size. If that were true, people like de Montherlant and Ezra Pound would be dwarfs, which they are not.

I think that it is justifiable to regard the novel as a unique form of literary expression, characteristic of Western urban society from the eighteenth century

to the present day. There are several obvious exceptions to this generalization, the Chinese novel in particular, but if we are to arrive at a coherent standard of criticism in dealing with novels as we now know them, the generalization is useful. It seems to me to give the bearings which we need.

No form of art can be regarded in isolation from the society in which the artist lives, and it is only comparatively recently in history that critics and readers have come to regard artistic activities as a separate branch of endeavour, similar to one of the branches of technology. Characteristic literary forms are only brought into existence by bodies of people who live, and to some extent think, along the same lines and in the same general pattern. At the present time the entire literary endeavour of 'serious' writers, with very few exceptions, and over a very wide area of the world, is divided unequally between the novel and lyrical poetry, with a commercial preponderance in favour of the novel. There are subsidiary reasons for this choice, including the financial advantages of fiction and the renewed technical resources of poetry, but the main incentive to novel writing is, for most of us, the fact that the novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying ideas and artistic statements in the context of our time.

The desire to write epic poetry has fortunately died out, though for many generations it continued to obsess even the most talented writers. It has been killed partly by the sense of its unfitness for what we have to say, in the circumstances in which it has to be said, and partly by the growth of sociological and historical literary criticism, which has made writers

aware of some of the factors which decide how far a form is appropriate to a period. There will always be a few eccentrics who are determined to grow bananas in Scotland, and there will always be a minority of temporally disorientated writers who exist in their own right in a different time and place, but I am assuming without argument that whatever the writer's conception of art, he writes to interpret something to somebody—in other words, he has a subject and an audience, and his problem is to bring them into contact, by making his own experience comprehensible. As long as that is true, one of the aptitudes necessary for valid literary work is the power to select a suitable form, and for the majority of writers the choice lies between the novel, the short story, and the lyrical poem.

To see why the novel characterizes our own period and civilization we need to look at society rather than at literature. The main feature of the other major techniques of communication is that they are addressed to an audience which shares with the artist a common background of cultural, religious or social belief. Narrative literature, which is in essence the technique of presenting experience through a picture of events which are realistic in their general scheme, though not necessarily in detail, has at various times produced epic and ballad poetry, the story, and the drama. The epic and the ballad, originally typical of primitive societies and small groups, with poor facilities for transmitting written literature, have been largely incorporated into a general lyrical tradition. The drama is pre-eminently a stylized presentation of a background which the audience shares with the writer, though his individual

treatment may be very different from theirs, and for it to continue as a major art form the audience must actively participate in the illusion, in the process of composition, and in the acceptance of the result. Great drama has almost always been produced in circumstances where the same type of relation exists between the writer and his audience as exists between a priest and his congregation—where the artist leads the expression of a communal attitude which he can criticize extensively but which he shares himself.

In our own society there has been a gradual replacement of drama in this sense by dramatized fiction. The approach of modern tragedy to its material is largely the approach of the novelist. There is no longer a segregation of speaker and hearer on opposite sides of a physical barrier, the stage, a factor which has played a large part in experimental drama and in theatre design since Elizabethan times. If a writer intends to make a conscious choice between the two methods of treatment he will be influenced by the fact that he has no common assumptions which he can take for granted in his audience. They are not a community of which he himself is part, but a number of persons sitting in separate chairs who do not know each other's names, and would hesitate to address each other without an introduction. I believe that this is the key to the nature of the novel. For the first time in recent history we have a totally fragmented society.

The predominant art form of Western urban cultures to-day is going to be addressed to a society in which the family is the largest coherent group, a family from which the individual members drop off as they reach

maturity so that its survival-time is limited and seldom exceeds two generations; in which the vast majority of the population does not know the names of the people three doors away; in which local communities are exceptional; in which human activities are almost wholly restricted to techniques, and the techniques limited to the groups actively practising them—railwaymen, clerks, chemists, labourers, and so forth; and in which the common-ground activities of human life are uniformly delegated—law and order to professional police, politics to professional politicians, football to professional footballers, and sex to professional film-stars. It is a society of onlookers, congested but lonely, technically advanced but utterly insecure, subject to a complicated mechanism of order but individually irresponsible because there is no communal sanction for or against any course of action, largely devoid of artistic expression but inundated with every kind of *kitsch*, and persisting mechanically in the routines of a morality and a social pattern which has been switched off and partly dismantled but continues to run for a while with the momentum it received during earlier periods. In this order art and scientific achievement are the only fixed points, the only part of the structure which will influence future civilizations. Besides the anthropological pattern, the writer recognizes to a greater or lesser extent the historical signs of increasing militarism coupled with increasing vulnerability, the signs that the non-civilization in which he is living is an end-point, about to be transmuted either slowly or catastrophically into another pattern, not as a result of political revolution, but as a result of simple mechanical breakdown

based on its incompatibility with the known social characters of man.

If we fail to realize this we shall fail to understand what we are at. The novel has grown to its present position through the nineteenth century from roots which existed before the industrial revolution and the advent of technical-asocial society. I believe it owes its characters almost wholly to that society. It is, in the first place, dependent on technical facilities which have never existed before. A novel cannot be memorized, it must be printed. It is radically individual in its approach, since it addresses itself to one reader at a time, and it can make no assumptions about his beliefs or activities comparable with those which the early nineteenth-century novel, addressed to a section of society, could make. It is the vehicle for serious literary communication based on narrative in a society where there is no common ground, no public myth which goes for granted, and an entire world has to be created and peopled separately in each book which is written.

Some of the literary consequences of the industrial revolution seem to have been the subjugation of the drama, primarily to the novel and secondarily, to lyrical poetry; and the elimination of communal forms of poetic and dramatic expression, except in closed groups. The rejects of society—negroes, bums, conscripts, political minorities, communities which persist on an economic or vocational basis—have, to some extent, managed to retain their autonomous forms in poetry, prose and music. Literature has tended to revert increasingly to desocialized forms, or rather to create them, since they are not a reversion to any primitive pattern. From the non-

city community the tendency of social institutions runs strongly towards the military tyrannopolitan state, where the destroyed group-relations of the family and neighbourhood reinforce aggressive sectional and national impulses, and we can already see the growth of a criticism which wishes to subordinate artistic forms, and popular literature in particular, to this pattern. The novel is unamenable to coercion, and in a military or financial tyranny it will become extinct. The environmental forces which produced it are at their end, not their beginning. It will remain appropriate so long as they are there, no longer.

Chief among the newer environmental forces is the rise of an approach, based on experiment, to the problems of conduct and cosmology with which art is interpretatively concerned. Historically the novel is not only the art form of social barbarism but the art form of the scientific method. It has been produced by a period of total failure in one field and astonishing success in the other, and while the failure is a pattern which has been repeated in other centralized societies, the success is without parallel. I sometimes wonder how far readers or writers are aware of the revolution in themselves and their attitudes which the success of the scientific method has produced. The novel has not only developed in step with social and urban barbarism, it has also developed during the period in which biology and physics have made their first fundamental advances since the time of Aristotle.

The idiocy of the antagonism which one hears preached between the 'artistic' and the 'scientific' outlook can only be a product of confusion between the purposes of science and the consequences of a power-

society. While the claim to be 'reasonable', and therefore scientific, in outlook is persistently made by the classicists, the followers of pure technique for its own sake, it is romanticism which has so far achieved the most intelligent synthesis of observation, philosophy and human responsibility. The attitude of the greatest novels has been, I would say, consistently romantic in its prime concern with the two essential conflicts, between Man and Death and between Man and Power. But the chief claim of the novel to the scientific method is that it is an observational form of art, it has both drawn upon and contributed directly to psychology, social anthropology, and even physics and biology. Anyone who assumes the mystical-artistic attitude to human behaviour and to the universe in general seems to me to cut himself off from the resources of the novel. He does not in fact cut himself off from the intellectual tradition of his time, because in attacking rational investigation he is deeply influenced by its results and methods, but he cannot achieve anything like the scope of realistic and analytical observation which contemporary novel-writing requires at its highest level. And it is to the highest level of achievement that I wish to limit myself in this discussion.

The novel in its wider sense covers a variety which is more closely comparable to the entire range of orchestral music, from Bach to Lyons' Corner House. There is a continual exchange between the levels of achievement. The scribbler imitates the techniques of the artist, and the artist is never entirely unaware of the fiddling underneath. The novel as an art form has spread slowly from a single narrow pencil at the beginning of the nineteenth century

into a continuous spectrum which we have to attempt to graduate in terms of 'seriousness'. A high proportion of the worst novels being those with the most serious intentions, it is probably wiser to recognize that the professionalism of art has been carried in our times to a length at which there are professionally bad artists as well as professionally second-rate artists and professionally 'serious' artists. This situation, in its contemporary form, must be exceptional, even by comparison with earlier Court literature, for the public *en masse* are not discriminating patrons. The professionalism of bilge is in itself no guarantee that *all* that is written at the bilge-level will be contemptible. There are pulp novels which have surprising merits that must have passed unrecognized by their public and their publishers, or the books would not be successfully in print. The trashy romances which were read by the heroines in Restoration plays were not meant by their authors to be trash, and the seriousness of intention which makes the improving novel of the mid-Victorian period so odious far exceeds that of most contemporary writing which calls itself literature. But the writing of bilge for bilge's sake is a down-growth of fiction which can only be regarded sociologically. It has no place in criticism, but it cannot be ignored.

2 · *The Concept of Responsibility*

I

THE 'STORY, AS ONE OF THE OLDEST LITERARY forces, has a double origin: it is a personal form of communication, but it belongs originally to the period of social art. I think that, in view of the peculiar conditions under which the novel exists, we place far too much emphasis on the narrative component in novel-writing. The critic who begins his discussion of the novel by stating that its first function is to 'tell a story' is usually an opponent of the experimental form: beside him we have large numbers of little books like Miss Bentley's *Some Observations on the Art of Narrative* which fail to draw any distinction whatever between novel-writing and narration, with the implication that the two are identical; that the novel is a rather longer story. I doubt if this would be true even if the novel had not acquired the peculiar technique of personal approach to a desocialized individual audience; narrative plays at least as great a part in drama and in poetry, and its place there is equally subsidiary to other factors. The apotheosis of narrative is not the novel but the *conte*, and the *conte* is the form which appeals pre-eminently to the stylist who is aware of his limitations. The justification of the novel is not that it is a longer section of narrative at the short-story level, but that its length and scope permit a coherent view of events to be presented. The *conteur* may be capable of producing such a work (Tchekov, Balzac and

Maupassant certainly were), but for the pure stylist, such as Stevenson, Stephen Crane, or Joyce, it is a form which should only be attempted in the presence of another aptitude, an integrative power, which is in many ways inimical to the elaboration of narrative for its own sake.

A coherent attitude towards history and events seems to me far more important as a qualification to write great novels. I do not mean that the novel is a vehicle for doctrinaire politics or religion, but I feel that even doctrinaire attitudes, although they may prevent the writer achieving the degree of responsibility sufficient for his work to be of major importance, are preferable to a chaotic or a nonchalant attitude to history.

There is a close analogy between narrative and melodic line—*lieder* can be works of superlative genius, but symphonic music requires another dimension beside melodic invention to attain the same standard of excellence. The greatest novelists are predominantly not the greatest narrators nor the greatest stylists. If narrative style were in fact the chief qualification for novel-writing, Stevenson and Stephen Crane would rank considerably higher than Tolstoy. The narrator is still relying upon his public for common ground, if only for the common ground of curiosity or enjoyment of a tale; and the *conte* is a form which has persisted throughout all cultural epochs with very little essential change. The novelist to-day has to cut himself off from any basic assumptions, and in doing so he must be capable of presenting the entire canvas which he selects in a framework of coherent vision which is very nearly explanatory. Furthermore, this 'major' vision

must be infinitely more clear-cut than its equivalent in music or painting, because literature expresses explicit ideas. A far greater strain falls on this cohering or synthetic aptitude in the novelist, and on the other essential attribute which goes with it, responsibility.

By responsibility I mean the refusal to abandon the basic conception of humanness for any extraneous object whatsoever—victory, democracy, the nation, the party, the civil list, or the libraries. It certainly does not consist in gradiloquent appeals to humanity. These are generally a symptom of the total involvement of the writer in the financial or political competitions of contemporary barbarism. It is not an attitude which can be cultivated. Nor is every member of present-day megalopolitan states obliged to make a clear-cut choice. He can alternately serve as firing-squad and target, bomber and bombed, with little change in his personal attitude, because barbarism has already pulled up the social roots of his humanity, though he retains the personal roots intact in his attitude to individuals whom he is able to recognize as individuals without any intervening abstraction. But the artist is forced at an early stage to make up his mind whether he regards himself as a man or a disguised quadruped, and in the novel his choice is revealed with astounding clarity. The bigger the conception and the higher the attempt, the more total the revelation of the outcome of the writer's decision. The progress of the century has made the revelation more complete and the decision more pointed. It was possible for the novelists of 1800 to evade it in much of their work. We can evade it in none.

I am not suggesting that the novel form is selected by writers on a basis of sociological criticism. Force of example, financial rewards, and public demand all play a part, but it is necessary to interpret the real basis for the feeling among writers that the novel is, in terms of their own intuitions and critical insight, a suitable vehicle for expression, before we can attempt any intelligent assessment of what is being written. The growth of correspondence courses in fiction seems to have had a wide influence on criticism, and large numbers of books addressed to the reading public deal chiefly with the mechanics of narration, as if that were the prime factor in novel-writing. The readers'-circle view appears to be this—that the writer selects his style and his subject entirely on a basis of appeal (to the reader, to the publisher, or to the public library, depending on his pretensions); that novel-writing is a technique, calling for a slightly more sustained effort than the short story, but mainly a matter of narration; and that to talk about 'craftsmanship' is a compliment to the writer who is under discussion. But more pretentious criticism seems to be equally doubtful of its own historical standards. Much of it is bogus psycho-analysis: the sociological reasons underlying the novel appear very rarely (Edmund Wilson and George Orwell have something like a monopoly) and it is possible to say that on the whole the intuitive choices of the writers are more rational and show more insight than the attempts of criticism to explain them.

Much of the critical muddle arises from the same source as the novel itself—the absence of coherent social patterns. The artist is in fact only doing better than most something which is a general human

activity in civilized societies, but which barbarism has professionalized, as it has professionalized almost every human activity. Novels depend on technology in printing and on professionalism in art, and any change in the status of art would probably supersede them. The correspondence-school critics are addressing amateurs who want to achieve professional recognition, the *litterati* are addressing an audience which has a stake in maintaining professional privilege in art, and both are really irrelevant to genuine standards of achievement. Psychology is clearly applicable in its general method to work which is as predominantly individual as the novel, but most published literary criticism in terms of analysis is the work of people wholly ignorant of the subject. They have tended to propagate a facile acceptance of mental abnormality as a prerequisite of art, and a readiness to assess the literary merit of a given work in terms of its author's mental equipment and unconscious motivation, both conclusions inimical to intelligent criticism.

When one is faced with a prospect of disintegration, and has a duty, an impulse, or an inner compulsion to react to it by writing, there are four courses open. Which course an individual writer takes will depend on his entire personality and background. He can make his escape into the contemplation of pure form, into lunacy, into a policy of making terms with barbarism; or he can consciously assume responsibility for his work and his times, and interpret what he sees in the light of his humanity. The three escape routes have come to cover an ever-increasing volume of art. Because his field is co-extensive with history, and his comment is explicit, the novelist has

been subject to the greatest pressures, and the majority of modern novels have to be seen as instances of escape along one of these lines. The pure form of *Finnegan*—set off against the humanity of *Dubliners* and the *Portrait*—the fantastic revival, the collaborationists of the war, Fascist and anti-Fascist, exemplify refugee art, novel-writing which is on the run. Novels which stand firm and keep their heads are rare enough to project above the disintegration, to avoid a protest which involves disintegrating oneself—Zweig's *Grischa*, Silone, Mann, Giono, some Koestler, the earlier Malraux—at least they stand firm. They know that if you kill a man he dies, whatever your intentions were; that if your convictions are leading you into officially-sponsored acts like Dachau and the atom bomb, you are, humanly speaking, insane; that it is to the person under your own feet that you owe responsibility. The seekers of pure form, such as the constructivists, produce work, often of great merit, but which ultimately imprisons them. The surrealists are brave enough to confront the grimace of barbarism with a mirror grimace, but purchase their satire at the cost of disintegrating themselves. As for the collaborators, they obey; they are the people who believe, because it is unpopular or tiresome or unprofitable to stand when other people are running. Tell them that you are fighting for the Good, and they will cheer any beastliness, or tell them you are going to rescue the kitten on the roof and they will follow you *down* any number of flights.

There is no way round or out of this *impasse* of choice any longer. The novelist cannot now restrict his field to a small area into which history does not intrude,

If he does, as some of the earliest social novelists did, the steady migration of the novel-form into wider and wider issues will catch him, and the quality of major achievement will fail to appear. Anything to-day which is smaller than life-size is too small, inadequate, and becoming irrelevant.

And the same division occurs among the critics. One of the chief features of any descent into barbarism is the growth of the critical idea of *Kulturbolschewismus*—the world is going to pieces and the writer who depicts it is the man who is responsible. He is undermining everything. The Gadarenes begin with an indignant puzzlement at work they cannot understand. They laugh at it, and in doing so they find out that it is critical of the particular allegiance which has taken them in. The laughter turns to an anthropoid rage. The writer, especially the experimental writer, is a public enemy—he fails to cheer in the right places—he sees the strings which work the illusion. Proust and Joyce were responsible for the fall of France—Zweig was a fifth-columnist undermining the soldierly virtues—others are indecent, irreligious, enemies of the tribal magic. Presently the critics discover that the Jews are behind it, or the Trotskyists or the Anarchists, and the paranoia of criticism is submerged in the general paranoia of whatever crusade for humanity happens to be in progress.

I am attacking this kind of criticism, not because Streicher and Rosenberg wrote it in 1935, but because it is being written in England now. Lord Elton, who is acutely aware of disintegration without being able to explain it, sets out to prove that much contemporary art and literature are the Dragon which

St George has to exterminate (that, I take it, was his intention, unless the dragon was Sir Osbert Sitwell). He attacks Zweig, Proust, and most of the writers whom Rosenberg proscribed in Germany. Noyes and Van Wyck Brooks have taken the same line. A recent book called *Addled Art*, by Sir Lionel Lindsay, suggests that the Jews are behind it all, and with this single addition any of this criticism might have come out of Drieu's *NRF* in 1940. Yet none of these critics is a Fascist, all of them have a sincere liking for literature. It is not a product of political ideology, but a loss of nerve, a fear of disintegration which wildly attacks anyone who points out the nature of the process.

2

Because of the involvement of the novel form with the entire structure of Westernism, beside and in which it has developed, its history is the history of a continuous movement to the present point, the point at which the writer is completely divested of any literary disguises, at which his success or failure depends on his power of comprehension as much as on his power of imaginative creation. The period of early industrialism and the rise of socialism coincided closely with the period at which conscious insight into history began to be a prime qualification for the novelist, and the novel itself reached its greatest heights in the hands of those writers who were capable of fulfilling those conditions before they became inescapable. The cyclical character of great art, and the way in which the finest productions of a

particular form occur in groups and in periods, seem to me to be due to the fact that when history is laying down the conditions of the form, a time arrives at which the best intellects engaged in attempting that form can see the conditions which are being laid down and follow them. To see the whole process we need to look at France and Russia, but in English literature alone there is a well-marked turning point in Dickens and Thackeray. Before them, narration, style, humour, and a sense of magnitudes qualify a novel for major achievement; after them, the criterion is an increasingly responsible understanding of social and historical events.

This statement reads very like the canon of Marxist criticism: that awareness of history is a prime criterion in art. I do not think that I mean the same thing. Understanding is perhaps not the right word. Sanity is closer to my meaning—immunity from being bamboozled or being paid or flattered to bamboozle—from being an S.S. man or an atom-bomb dropper on the one hand, or a Government stooge on the other. In medicine, one talks of insight, meaning the ability to recognize a delusion for a delusion, to distinguish a product of one's own mind from a manifestation of an outer reality. It implies a wholeness of personality, an absence of division in the mind. One can repeat sociological or historical criticism parrot-fashion and still be as much taken in by it as a lunatic is by his claims to the throne. The test I propose to the reader is not what the man says, but how far he shows himself able to see a man for a man, with nothing interposed. In a Turkish bath where everyone is dressed in a towel, you cannot tell a Fascist murderer from a heroic and high-minded

Democrat. Hitler looks like President Truman. You rub the back of your political or racial opponent with a bathbrick, and know him for a man because of his skin. You would hesitate to convert him by butchering his wife and family. Outside, when the uniforms are put on, you will do whatever lunacy your team recommends as the quickest route to the receding carrot which it dangles in front of your nose. The responsible writer sees everyone naked, and is as naked himself. He is not devoid of political and moral judgments, but he makes them equally. In reading, therefore, ask: Is this writer capable of recognizing a human being? Is he able to reject the art of diverse weights, for which an act identical in every respect is a heroic but regrettable necessity when done by Our Side and a contemptible atrocity when done by Their Side? Is his judgment of human decisions level or weighted; does he know filth from food, whatever the wrapper? If he does, he is capable of being a great artist under barbarism, and if not, he is another part of barbarism made manifest. *The Moon is Down* or *L'Attaque du Moulin*—which?

3 · *The Mechanics of Patronage*

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE OUTSTANDING novelist, whatever its justification from the viewpoint of artistic morality, is hardly likely to be popular. It is reasonable to ask why, if the outstanding novel is compelled to be antagonistic to the whole outlook of barbarism, novels of merit continue to be published with remarkable impunity even in totalitarian states, and why the novel remains socially and commercially tolerated. It is not enough to say that human beings, however much involved in barbarian patterns of behaviour, retain a good deal of their humanity, because other forms of art which have been similarly critical in outlook have been suppressed by other societies, either through failure of patronage or by direct administrative action. The answer lies in another unique property of contemporary fiction—its peculiar type of patronage. I have said that the novel directs itself to the individual, ignoring all his social connections and ties and speaking in the privacy of his closet, and a consequence of this privacy is that the novel is directly patronized by the individual even more fully than drama in Athens was patronized by the community. The techniques of printing in bulk have rendered this possible in every urbanized society which is literate. While much of this patronage is diverted to lower levels of attempt and achievement, the serious writer is largely financed by it, and the novel owes its continuance and its power of survival far into the

tyrannopolitan revolution to this absence of intermediaries between writer and reader.

The state of the modern American novel is even more socially dictated than that of our own. I deal with it first because in spite of the great vitality of modern American literature the American scene is something of an awful warning to readers and writers here. The entire mechanism of publishing in contemporary America has been thrown out of gear, not by a public demand for bad work, nor even by public intolerance of social criticism (the American public is infinitely more broad-minded in its reading than in its attitudes—it swallowed Sinclair and Dreiser and Steinbeck and paid them handsomely), but by a kind of sweepstake mentality derived from the gigantic rewards which are involved in the production of a successful book. To Englishmen accustomed to the small, self-supporting publishing-house, represented by dozens of self-contained businesses ready to consider nearly all the possible levels of writing, it is almost incredible that ninety per cent of novels issued by American publishers are undertaken at an expected dead loss, in the interest of the greater or lesser literary jackpots on which the business is to be made profitable. For this state of affairs the high wage-rates, unwillingness of printers to use machines for small impressions, and large overhead costs of commercial travelling in a large country are all to blame, but the highest single item, running into thousands of dollars, is advertisements in the trade press to stimulate bookshop orders.

Demoralizing as this probably is for the publisher, it is far more so for the author, and the last state of the 'socially responsible' writer is frequently pitiable—

a rather nightmarish literary guzzler surrounded by tycoons to whom he has to be polite, writing drivel-scripts or war propaganda with as much cynicism as he can decently command, and revenging himself by slipping in satirical asides which may get through. The responsible literature of America, except for occasional successes, like those of Farrell or Faulkner, depends almost entirely on philanthropy, the export of MSS to England, and luck. I doubt if one American edition of Miller, Patchen, Rexroth, or even many editions of Faulkner or the earlier Steinbeck paid their way: Laughlin runs *New Directions*, the most progressive of the literary publishing-houses, at a loss of some fifteen thousand dollars annually, publishing work which in England, published by a concern of the size and status of, say, Hogarth Press or Grey Walls Press, would cover costs easily and would be unlucky if it did not show a profit of a few pounds. Writers who publicly underrate the temptation of money are certainly not proof against concrete offers in nine cases out of ten, and the collapse of fiction-writers one after another into acquiescence is even more depressing than it would be if state censorship prevented anyone non-acquiescent from being printed openly. The lack of any middle term between dead loss and a financial bonanza makes it impossible for publishers to keep their minds off the sure thing.

The 'sure thing' is the moronic composite novel, written in collaboration by advertising agents and script-writers, in which normal sexuality is taboo but sadism essential, political thought replaced by operatic attitudes, and the whole puffed with a figurehead author, usually a female good-looker, and groomed

for filming. In view of these conditions it is astounding that the best-seller market should be worth study. It has produced no great novels, but several very interesting ones. I am thinking of books like *Northwest Passage* (excluding the superadded irrelevant second half, which is not part of the picture) or *Anthony Adverse*, an astounding combination of goodness and badness: this book seems in the aggregate to be a successful illusion in genre-writing, a novelistic equivalent of *Hassan* or Rimsky's *Scheherazade*, which may be irritating but for which it is hard not to feel some respect. The mechanics of the situation make it almost inevitable that it should be the writer's first book which is the best, the others representing downward degrees of conformity, *Of Mice and Men* compared with *The Moon is Down*, or Sinclair then with Sinclair now, or Hemingway the novelist with Hemingway the war-reporter. It is uncommonly hard, even for the most Spartan of writers to keep himself from relaxing.

The state of English publishing, as regards the novel, is nothing like so discouraging. There is a common illusion among readers, fostered by unsuccessful writers, that vast numbers of MSS of genius are in some way suppressed, either by the commercialism of publishers or the stupidity of the public. It is important for intelligent readers to recognize that at present very nearly everything which is publishable at any of the many levels of fiction has an outlet. This was truer, perhaps, in 1943; but it is still true. The rewards of the financially successful author being nothing like as dazzling as in the United States, novels are written either as a regular employment, like making boots, or out of conviction, or from a

compulsion to shine without taking any socially unacceptable action to draw notice on oneself. In spite of what I have said about the 'serious' intention of the novel, I have no quarrel with the purely manufactured product except insofar as it competes unfairly for the talent of potential writers and is acquiescent, collaborationist, and safe. I do not think that fiction has played any serious part in 'debauching public taste' or any of the other activities attributed to lowbrow novels by those who dislike them. Nor are the intentionally bad works, produced to measure, serious except as a symptom. The only really serious mischief which can be done by fiction, from the social viewpoint, occurs when a previously progressive, or reputedly progressive, novelist is bought up. The patron of the novel is the individual. It is one of the few functions, other than procreation, which he seems to retain. For this, and other more strictly financial reasons, the condition against which the novel has no power of survival is the centralization of publishing. Whether this occurs as part of a military-tyrannical control of the press, or as a result of commercial monopoly, it destroys the personal patronage of the writer, and imposes conformity accompanied by large financial rewards. While a state censorship can usually be fooled or circumvented, a monopoly is far more serious in its effect, because it does not tend to evoke any active resistance, and the tendency exemplified in America towards the drug-store novel, written to a pattern by a committee, boomed by advertisement and the selection of a ghost to masquerade as author and provide a point at which self-identification with the characters can take place, is on the whole a

greater threat to good writing than the sort of thing we have seen in Germany, Russia, and the Ministry of Information. But the fiction written under any of these conditions is a public or corporate activity of the readers, like spectatorship at a football match. Its cohering forces are sadistic or masochistic fantasy, or one or other of the patterns of group aggression. It can produce nothing which represents comment, any more than a mirror is capable of comment. Such books are symptoms, not novels.

It is impossible to foresee the future of any society with more accuracy than a meteorologist can produce when he forecasts the weather. We know that a given situation is likely to progress in a certain way. We can also say with confidence that the novel as an art form would be destroyed or profoundly modified by a technological collapse, by the military destruction of urban societies, by the plutocratic control of the press, and less certainly by the advent of total military or political tyranny. The tendency under tyranny is for the novel to remain as an acquiescent form of art, sponsored by the tyrants, and for resistance work, faced by the almost insuperable difficulty of printing clandestine novels of any length, to turn into other channels such as poetry and drama. On the other hand, tyranny of a predictably brief duration encourages novel-writing, the work being smuggled out of the affected zone or kept until after the collapse of the tyrants. A stable tyrannical order which lasted more than fifty years would be likely to stamp out the novel form: it might also disappear in a free society, where the opportunity for communal culture and communal artistic activity had replaced the need for a fragmentary art based on professionalism.

4 · *The Angle of Narration*

I

LOOKING BACK AT THE NOVEL, THEN, WE CAN see, both as writers and as readers, that we stand at the end of one period in the story of literary expression, not at its start, that the form we know as the novel has changed radically since it came into existence, has passed its artistic zenith, is seriously threatened by the instability of the environment on which it depends, but is in no sense dead or inactive. The only civilization of which we have a full record during its decline from megalopolitanism is ancient Rome. The Romans had no novels as we understand them, although the conditions for their production were many of them well-developed. It is probable that the absence of any sufficient techniques of duplicating copies made the form impossible as a means of author-to-individual communication, although the Roman publishing industry had highly-developed systems of mass production through slave copyists. The next thousand years produced the prose romance, from which there arose in seventeenth-century Europe a technique of prose narrative, wider in its interpretative scope than the story, upon which a tradition could accumulate. With the advent of efficient printing, the earliest novels could be written in a form which showed a relatively late and full degree of development. The picaresque form, chosen specifically to extend the spatial range of the novel beyond the scope of the story, derived much from

the romances and much from the satiric narrative. Our best English examples of the second of these, *Gulliver* and *Erewhon*, illustrate the way in which early and unspecialized forms persist when later and more specialized ones have a very limited survival—one cannot imagine either Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf continuing as models in a hundred years, because of their deliberate limitation to meet certain conditions which are unlikely to recur.

The imaginary journey is just as fresh in Butler's hands as in Swift's. The main stream of the novel broadened into higher and lower levels of interpretation ('serious' and 'non-serious', if you wish), but with continuous exchange and overlapping. The broadening was assisted by the prevalence of the love-story, the 'romance', on one hand, and the picaresque, the 'spiv story', on the other, both providing components for the later growth of the form to maturity. The picaresque form in its pure state recurs time and again. It represents either a protest against social rigidity, in which the reader is expected to sympathise with the rogue, or, in modern hands, an impassioned statement—I am what I am because of you. The common ground of *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit*, *Ferdinand Count Fathom* and a work like Camus's *The Outsider*, where to the rogue's confession is added an element of psycho-analytical insight, lies in the conflict between the person and the corporate Citizens who back each other up and have faces as similar as those in a clock-shop. They may be right or wrong but they are commonly insupportable.

Where the form reached its height, its diversity and elaboration were equal to that of any other artistic field, not excluding poetry. The range of achieve-

ment of Balzac, Zola, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, Dickens, Thackeray, and Hardy alone, without any of the smaller-scale talents of the hundred years which covers all of them, is as astounding as the closely similar blossoming-out of a group of animals in a fossil-bed which coincides with the optimum condition for their existence. The basic forms are there, many persisting from very much older deposits, but the variety is a manifestation of the same process as we see in literary history—a form ripe to develop and an environment in which development was possible. To blame contemporary writers for failing to achieve the nineteenth-century scope and facility is on a level with blaming an elephant for failing to give birth to a mammoth. If we could all be induced to see the social background of literary development and its irreversibility, the claims made on the novel to-day might be less extravagant and more founded on intelligent comprehension.

2

The novel has now moved into a new social context. It is faced with conditions whose nature and complexity the writers of the nineteenth century never had to encounter. To meet and interpret these conditions, fresh technical resources have become available which raise problems that the contemporary novelist has to consider and work out either by insight or intelligence.

The first is the angle from which the story is to be told. The circumstances of the novel are such that in it the reader has to be attached to a fixed point if he is

to be made capable of following the sequence of events. That point is either in the story, as a participant character, or outside it, in the identity of the writer. One can either make the reader *experience* the story or *tell* it.

Clearly, if the viewpoint taken by the writer is that of one character or of successive characters, the sequence of sensory impressions reaches the reader in the same form and order as they reach the character. If the viewpoint is that of the writer himself, as a spectator, the sequence is the same as it would be if the reader were himself telling the story. The chief importance of this difference to-day lies in the change which has taken place in the visual power of imagination which the author and audience shares, and which has been largely brought about by the advent of the cinema.

Narrative prior to 1900 had two main sources of visual evocation, real experience and the drama. In experiencing any given sequence of events in visual terms, we are not in general aware of the position of our own eyes. We locate our personal viewpoint at the particular spot where we are standing, and how wide our angle of vision is at any moment depends roughly on the speed and character of the events we are observing. A stationary landscape seen from a moderate height (Egdon Heath, for instance), exists very nearly all round us, except for a small area immediately behind our heads, of which we can become aware on turning round. If a fight is going on in the middle-distance, the range of ground on either side of our heads from which someone can come up unawares increases. Absorbing events nearer still restrict the seen range considerably more.

In a drama acted on a modern stage, events are presented in a definite frame, and it is a deliberate convention that our relevant vision is limited to the ninety degrees in front of us while we remain stationary in our seats. The film, however, combines both types of visual perception. The space behind and on each side of us, as in a play, is taken as irrelevant to the illusion, and at the same time the quality of real visual experience is achieved by positioning the camera. In other words, the film takes hold of our heads and directs our effective area of attention at will. It cannot rotate us effectively through much more than two right-angles, but it can fix a near-point and then rotate. Some experiments have been made with film montages in which the camera is made to coincide with the eyes of a single participant character, *i.e.* punches directed at his jaw travel directly towards and slightly below the screen as the audience sees it. More commonly the camera takes the viewpoint of a narrative character who can move in any direction, up or down.

Before the cinema became a general feature of entertainment, the novelist could select a wide range of combinations, of which three were predominant: direct narration, the convention of the present third party; personal narration, approaching normal conversational statement of experience, where the narrator is external to his hearer; and an extension of ordinary narrative to cover experiences such as thoughts or intentions, which are not visually obvious. In the first case the reader is a spectator; in the second, a listener; in the third, a spectator and mind-reader.

The film has developed the power of audiences to react

to direct visual presentation in narrative, and it has also given a far wider insight to the writer into the nature of the techniques which he uses, largely by extending his experience. The novelist of 1850, unless he possessed unusual energy, had not looked at a normal city from a great height, although his visual imagination enabled him to imagine how it would look. In the earliest novels, therefore, there was a tendency for the visual presentation to take one of the fairly simple narrative forms. One of the chief consequences of the cinematographic approach, however, the appreciation of the importance of *height* in securing effect, was already evident in the work of Zola, Tolstoy, and Flaubert long before films were invented. Clearly, the higher the viewpoint above the ground, the wider the scope of the effective vision, the greater the atmosphere, and the less the perception of detailed movements. In the recent novel the technical discoveries of Zola have been extended in a remarkable degree, and for this extension I think the cinema is largely responsible.

Take the beginning of *Germinal*. A road with a wet surface extends into a plain, covered with rows upon rows of beet-plants, and on it two legs are walking. The man walks past and out of you, into the flat country. As he moves, you follow. It is getting darker; but after a few minutes, in which you see both his shape and his experiences of the last few days, an embankment with braziers burning on it, round which machinery shoots up out of sight, comes slowly out of the mist, and as it approaches you recognize the slag-tip and the rails for the coal-tubs. Or the end of *La Bête Humaine*—the fight on the footplate, the two men falling from the driverless engine,

and the trainload of howling conscripts rushing across France. Renoir, who has always managed to improve Zola in filming him, by a rigorous cutting of non-essentials and a deep insight into the technique of his work, carries the camera up vertically, the train running out from under it, along a bridge as symmetrical as Hobbema's line of poplars. He opens the film with a shot directly into the open fire-door of the same train.

I feel that readers probably under-estimate the difficulty of treatment in purely narrative writing. Narrative stretches in the novel are often easy to write at speed, because they carry themselves along in a way which overcomes the tremendous inertia and unwillingness with which writers often approach the work of writing. But they dictate the pace of a large-scale novel more than any other factor, and they tend to determine the scale itself by determining the range of the writer's vision. Unless the novelist is deliberately aiming at a secondary barrier between the reader and the scene, he cannot depict a fixed-angle performance on a stage. Framing of incident (the little figure at the window before Sedan, walking up and down trying to make up its mind) has to be done with discretion. What the novelist has produced is a closed box, in which he can make peep-holes at any suitable point, and into which he can carry his reader.

I regard the extension of experience provided by the films, and the way in which their technique analyses this physiological side of narrative, as more important than the conscious attempts of opportunists to write filmable novels, since most of the opportunist writers have no sort of insight into the film

technique. Like flying, it has enormously extended the range of visual experience, and that is its chief importance to the novelist and his reader.

3

The second problem of the fixed-point is connected with this essential tendency of the reader to identify himself with the character presented for the purpose, or with the author. The figure presented in this way is the 'hero', and it is necessary to judge correctly the scope of the audience's power of accepting a particular hero for this purpose in order to aim the work which is being written. One can either employ a character with whom identification is easily acceptable, and sketch his attributes lightly, or one who is unacceptable and justify him. For this reason, the wider the divergence between the writer's attitude and that of the audience, the greater the degree of characterization necessary in drawing the character with whom identification is to take place. This explains to some degree why the melodramatic figure requires no character (he is a deliberate construction made up of socially acceptable attributes), and why the unacceptable hero is generally the most fully characterized, the substance of the complaint of Gadarene criticism that modern novelists 'take such pleasure in writing about unpleasant people'. The acquiescent novel either produces a pep-figure, or, more recently, an uncritical depiction of the destructive and antisocial impulses of which everyone is ashamed in public and conscious in private. The club-swinging, two-fisted blackguard who has gradu-

ated in the last few years from twopenny adolescent fiction to serious belletristic writing, the gentleman with deficient culture and large *cojones*, has been promoted to suit an audience which is increasingly immature in all its social attitudes. On the other hand, one of the most striking examples of an unacceptable hero who is being presented critically to the reader as a means of explaining his conduct is Mersault in Camus's *The Outsider*. The problem here is to explain the actions and attitudes of a man who has one of the chief attributes of barbarian civilizations—deficient response to any normal emotion, resulting from the mischief done to him by his childhood in an asocial society. He is also a schizoid psycho-path, but most of his conduct is due to the suppression of affect which goes with the horizonless, purposeless, unorientated life of a modern society.

This kind of problem is typical of the contemporary novel, with the background of technical and scientific awareness which it has derived from psychology, and the rootless, shiftless society in which it exists. There is something in common between Mersault & Jean Valjean, but Camus understands his character, while Hugo sympathizes with his. It is clear that the shift of approach is part of a general change in outlook. Fagin or Quilp is bad because he likes it, though perhaps social injustice plays some part in such antisocial behaviour. Valjean is partly corrupted by his experiences, but remains good at heart. Mersault is neither—he is simply what he is, a personality. It would have been outside the range of Dickens's or Hugo's perceptions to present Quilp or Valjean as they appeared to themselves. Mersault's most striking feature is his apparent insight com-

bined with unconcern. He assists a pimp to write a scandalous letter to his Arab girl, is involved in a puerile feud with her Arab brothers (which is not his business and in which he has no real concern), and tells his story in the condemned cell while waiting to be guillotined for shooting one of them. The first-person narration is essential for two reasons. Without it, we should see Mersault as the rest of society sees him; and it enables us none the less to stand outside him and share in the writer's psychoanalytical judgment of the *causes* of his attitudes. Mersault explains them and gives evasive reasons. He misses the point, talks round it, assumes indifference. Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* is the same affectless, rootless person. Greene does not, I feel, fully understand him, because he is concerned to convey the conception of Sin, and as far as the last page of the book he is using Pinkie as a demonstration case. It is only in that last page that he himself, under the impetus of his own story, collides violently with the hollowness of his own God, and is faced with the choice of trying to hide it from us or going on to the logical conclusion. He goes on. How much of the experience of this study has reached the writer consciously one cannot say—only that his attitude to objective reality has been tested by his own hypothetical case. It is not very frequent for the reader to be able to detect that the author has learned from his own material, but this looks like a case in which that has happened and much of the excellence of the book derives from it.

Those who read about Mersault will fall into one of three groups, all of which Camus must have been able to foresee: those who resent the whole book;

those who understand Mersault as well as Camus does, and applaud the book because of its insight; and those who detect in their own personality the affectlessness and psychopathy of the man who is describing himself and react by disquiet, a measure of comprehension, and thought. The first group, including most of the Gadarene critics, and everyone who has become stuck at the Quilp-level, heaped abuse on Camus and denounced Mersault as a particularly detestable type of spiv, the 'glorification' of whom ought to be prohibited. (Some of them said the same thing in other words—Mersault was the typical product of a corrupt bourgeois mind, etc.) Leite in America has written a reasoned exposition of the psychiatric side of the story, and he seems to me typical of the comprehending attitude. The real audience are the people who find the story disquieting: 'Here is a detestable person who is detestable because of me, and whom I resemble'.

5 · *Violence, Sadism, and Miss Blandish*

IN THE TRANSITION TOWARDS AN URBAN society, conversation becomes increasingly difficult to handle as a literary medium. The reason is not that common speech is inartistic—a number of cultures have held this view, and have produced fossil languages confined almost entirely to literature—but that it tends to increasing uniformity. In avoiding this highest-common-factor language, writers have adopted various devices, and the desire for an idiom which is both intelligible and sufficiently unusual to assist in producing ‘atmosphere’ has led to a rifling of dialects, Irish and Welsh in particular, to the creation of pseudo-dialects, and to attempts at literal reporting. Another source of trouble has been the desire of Socialist realists to write ‘for the workers’ in what they conceive to be popular idiom. Much of this dialogue is grossly under-observed, and it has created a language which is not spoken by workers or anybody else.

Where a novel is in the first person, the conversation-problem is one of style throughout the narrative. The character of the scenery in the present generation makes an ability to describe rapid sequences of movement, violent events, and emotional restlessness, and it was with this function that the elliptical style of much first-person writing of to-day was evolved. It also owes something to the enormous acceleration of language, both in rate and colour sequence, by the development of mass journalism. When readers

accuse novelists of possessing a bloodshot style, they need to be aware of the vast inflation which has taken place both in the currency and the appreciation of violence. The normal nineteenth-century intensifiers have been inflated out of existence in advertising puffs and in hysterical reportage, and to present normality to a public whose pity is equally choked by custom of fell deeds is a matter of achieving shock-effect. The question of stylistic violence is wrapped up with the question of violence in general. The increase of sadistic imagery and of violence in modern literature is a tendency which hardly anyone who reads extensively can have failed to notice, unless it is that the whole apparatus of writing has become so widely invaded by toughness of every kind that the social trends behind it have lost some of their sharpness. The reading public in an age of exceptional public violence has become acclimatized to violent books, but sadism and violence are by no means the same thing, and it is with the second that I am concerned. When Bloch, some twenty years ago, characterized the association between brutality and sex as a typically English phenomenon he was undoubtedly prejudiced, but there is sufficient truth in the charge to make it of interest to the student of literature. More striking still was the remark by 'Pietro Fraxi', that during the nineteenth century, at a period which closely coincided with the Industrial Revolution, erotic literature in England underwent a change away from the healthily bawdy towards the brutal. 'It is obvious that modern authors have allowed themselves to be influenced by de Sade, and have imitated the cynicism, cruelty and lasciviousness . . . which, it must be admitted, he handled with masterly skill.

That is why the character of English erotic fiction has undergone a radical change, resulting in the complete loss of its healthy tone.' One reason for the change, that overtly pornographic literature ceased to be tolerated, and only subjects whose relation to sex was not recognized by Queen Victoria could get through, seems to have escaped 'Fraxi's' notice, but there are other causes for the extreme cult of toughness which has invaded even belletristic and 'serious' writing.

Violence *per se*, political, social, and personal, is not a sexual so much as a social phenomenon, characteristic at the moment of big-city communities with their centralized power, their militarism, their proletariat, and their civic irresponsibility and frustration. But it is far less the appreciation and acceptance of violence than the worship of cruelty which is so noticeable at the moment. Sadism is not primarily a social phenomenon, but most probably an exaggeration of a normal component of instinctive mating behaviour, and like much similar behaviour it has three prominent characteristics: it is present potentially in almost all individuals; it is extremely readily acquired by public sanction; it evokes a reaction from the conscious level which makes it more formidable as an unconscious force than as a source of overtly brutal conduct. It differs from most other abnormal sources of pleasure in being infinitely more destructive socially, whether it is conscious, as it was at Dachau, or unconscious, as it was in the Victorian public school, or is, in spite of reformist ideals, in the modern prison system, and it is readily infectious through practice, public example and literary acceptance. It is with the last of these that I am chiefly

concerned here, and while it has to be admitted that the existence of a society based, as all forms of barbarism are based, on power and on unlimited public violence, makes the acceptance of cruelty rather easier, in the literary field epidemic sadism is as striking among the opponents of barbarism as among its advocates. There is on the whole more sadistic material in Faulkner, Hemingway, and even thorough-going recalcitrants like Miller or Patchen, than in all the pronouncements of the power-bosses. I do not think that this is an adverse comment on their work, but it is important to realize its origins.

The reactions of a normal individual to the discovery of his own animal appetites are very diverse—if his desire for brutality is overt he can become a bully or a Fascist—if it is not, his reaction is far more tortuous. He will tend either to rationalize his desires in the interests of discipline, justice, order and so forth, and thereby make them respectable enough to be admitted to consciousness, or he will over-react to them and become a reformist, a pacifist, an opponent of brutality. This last phenomenon explains the savagery of much of Patchen's imagery and the extreme idealism which goes with it—it is undoubtedly one of the most satisfactory means of disposing of an antisocial impulse, but the process ought to be at least partly conscious, as in his case it is. It is the unconsciously rationalized form which is so destructive: one can make a bully ashamed of himself, but not a disciplinarian. A rather morbid sensitivity to physical violence can produce an anthropoid thug who enjoys being such, or it can produce *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which belongs, psychologically, to the literature of over-reaction: between the two is the

other product, the martinet, the exterminator of Jews or Huns, the idealistic bully—it is he who is the most intractable and incorrigible figure of megalopolitanism.

Accordingly, apart from the few writers upon whom epidemic sadism has had little effect, one can trace all stages of its impact upon personalities in the literary field. There are conscious bullies—Montherlant, the tougher-yet detective writers; unconscious bullies, the power-and-order school, the writers of books against Huns and letters to the press urging bigger and better floggings, all the exponents of realism against sentimentalism; dilettanti, like Masson and the *View* circus; artists whom war has enabled to make serious and responsible material out of the contemplation of brutality—Goya, Szobel, Fautrier; professional technicians in atrocity propaganda like Ehrenburg and the English war-pamphleteers; and those who use brutality to expose brutality, like Patchen and Faulkner. Besides them, we find the group in whom the process of resolving the conflict is incomplete, where sexual athleticism, cruelty, responsibility, and over-reaction are mixed in varying proportions.

Now while abnormalities of human mating-behaviour are very numerous, the only one of long-term social importance is the sado-masochistic reaction pattern, because it manifests itself openly in aggression towards other, and innocent, people, and because in a partially rationalized form it affects the public activity of its subjects. No legislator was ever materially affected in his public acts by being a homosexual or an exhibitionist, except possibly towards a more rational view of these abnormalities, but all the most

odious legislators—one is tempted to omit the qualification, in view of the close association of sadism with the desire to govern—have been expressing abnormal impulses towards cruelty in a rationalized form. It is this fact, and the contagiousness of sadism compared with other sexual behaviour-disorders, coupled with the way in which it tends to become involved with the whole mechanism of self-satisfied egotism which exists in many psycho-paths, which makes its social importance so great. It goes more closely with hypocrisy—a state which has little psychological reality, since, with regard to our unconscious impulses, we are all demonstrable hypocrites—than other abnormal patterns. It can be evoked in most normal persons by education, example, or a conspiracy of social circumstances whose common feature is ashamedness towards normal erotic activities and physical or psychical impotence. And although Freud and his successors have thrown much light on its mechanism and its mode of action on the personality, we have as yet very little idea of social prophylaxis, or even of the physical basis upon which the sado-masochistic impulse rests. Post-industrial megalopolitanism has had its share of cruelty and hypocrisy, and Bloch's bizarre racialism, which tried to represent these as 'Anglo-Saxon' vices inherited by the English, has been superseded by the more bizarre racialism which depicts them as basically German or Russian, but we are no nearer to a comprehension of their full rôle in our own and our society's existence.

Compared with the legislative sadists, the upholders of law and retribution, by whom our whole conception of penology has been moulded and vitiated, artists

come off with far less discredit. A high proportion of them are aware of their own impulses: many use them as a source of responsibility, and even of strength, much as the presence of the English or the Germans revived Irish and French literature by providing a tangible enemy, and those who succumbed to them usually confined their sadism to day-dreaming, using their work as less literate dyserotics use the walls of public lavatories. Their main contribution to the growth of cruelty has been that they have rendered it artistically respectable and have put ideas into people's heads. I see no way to avoid this charge. Writers to-day have to write about the world as it is and people as they are. They run the risk of aggravating their abnormalities by discussing them, unless they possess great power of exposition and an unshakeable integrity in the perpetual drumming-in of the ethic of responsibility.

All these factors, the physiological response to violence, which is as observable as the watering of a man's mouth when he smells food, the substratum of social and sexual frustration, the natural idealization of the criminal who is in revolt against society which allows the irresponsible to forget his viciousness, have gone into the ancestry of Miss Blandish, of Hitler, of the War for Democracy.

However much literary toughness is a part of this phenomenon of over-reaction, the dangers of the process were particularly striking in wartime atrocity-propaganda, a form of mental aberration which seems to be historically new. There is nothing new in black-guarding your enemies, but that is not the technique of the M.o.I. atrocity. The only thing which the material considered atrocious has in common is its

sexual character. The method of administration is to select or invent an action with sadistic repercussions and retail it with a denunciatory comment. The first reaction of the audience is not disapproval, but stimulation—one rape is an atrocity, two million deaths in the Indian famines were not, and were played up in Germany by a wholly different technique. The subsequent reaction of the audience is steered by the quantum of denunciation in the news-item, designed to assist those who might be unequal to the disapproval which is required. The public catches itself in the act of being stimulated and over-reacts violently against the perpetrators of the alleged action. This being safely over, they can proceed to enjoy the erogenic idea without qualms of conscience. The pornography of war is important because, being deliberately produced to assist the state-holders, it is tolerated when other forms are not. But its effect in increasing the desire of the public for further matter of the same kind and inuring us to barbarism is as marked as that of work which openly approves of brutality.

These factors, the human cruelty common to all ages and societies, the subsidized sadism used as a means of government, and the increasing violence of events, are the causes which underlie the 'tough' novel. Beside these, megalopolitanism begets sexual gaucherie, long separations, impotence and subacute anxiety, and pain is notorious as a refuge for the impatient and physically frustrated.

The advent of literary sadism coincided temporally with the advent of the industrial age. The most striking, because perhaps the earliest, apparition of sadism in the polite novel was in the work of Dickens. He is

the turning-point in a number of literary processes. He has become so much a part of the literary landscape of this country that we tend to leave him outside analysis as well as to under-estimate his importance. It was not till Edmund Wilson, an American and a member of a nation which Dickens seems to have misunderstood and disliked, that a serious evaluation of his work and its origins was attempted. The Christmas-pudding joviality and the zeal for reform cannot disguise the fundamentally morbid nature of his fascination with physical violence: *Nicholas Nickleby* is in part the novel of a flagello-maniac; that Squeers deserved what he got is more a rationalization of Dickens's interest in his doings and his final beating-up than a cause of his creation. The other forms of sadism are paraded with the same clinical accuracy which has been observed in Dickens's neurological case-histories—they are in part *choses vues*, but also unquestionably in part experienced. Squeers is the schoolmaster-flagellant, and the hangman-virtuoso of *Barnaby Rudge*, the inflated Dombey persecuting his daughter, Sykes and his sex-murder, Miss Murdstone and her small chain-mail reticule, Quilp, Fagin and a host of others are portraits of the forms which sadism may take, drawn with the clinical accuracy of Krafft-Ebing. That Dickens turns his desire for violence against men who at least merit exposure—his mobs burn down prisons, his heroes only beat bullies—demonstrates the methods by which a novelist of integrity deals with his own abnormal impulses. But the dangers of such an attempt to make constructive capital from pathology are there also. Some part of the almost maudlin sentimentalism of the reformist passages is due to self-accusation.

I am not attempting to suggest that sadistic patterns were not current in fiction prior to Dickens, from Shakespeare onwards, but they were certainly far less current in polite fiction, unless one regards the school of ghoulishness and Gothicism as one such manifestation. But 'Fraxi's' statement that in the main eroticism prior to the industrial revolution was conscious and concerned with normal physical pleasures, and after that event became less conscious, more abnormal, and more wedded to brutality, is undeniably true. To the sensualist such as Rochester, who exhausted almost every conceivable perversity, sadistic rituals (of a fairly harmless kind) were a pepper to improve a basically normal appetite; to subsequent erotic writers they have tended more and more to become a staple diet, rather as alcohol, an equally physiologically-conditioned and equally acquired taste, is an occasional accessory to the gourmet, but an article of diet to the drunkard. The most important single cause of this change was the physical limitation of normal sexual enjoyment imposed by poverty, lack of privacy, and desocialization upon the poor, and by a terroristic religious outlook combined with a thoroughly septic prudery among the middle classes. The social products of urbanization were twofold—impotence, and a diversion of normal sexuality into sadistic channels—and we are inheritors in part of the consequences. Such an age produces authoritarians and sentimentalists, fanatical punishers and fanatical reformers in almost equal numbers, among those who rationalize or react from their recognition of a desire for cruelty, and the early neotechnical period certainly produced both. Pulp literature is the most notable section of the public

unconscious which we have at our disposal. If bel-
letristic work resembles the purgation of the emo-
tions by intelligent analysis, the pulp novel and the
crime magazine are not far removed in function from
the lavatory-wall inscription, but they have the great
disadvantage that they propagate ideals, and if these
ideals include the glorification of bullying, then bul-
lying will become a part of the group ideal—it can
almost be transferred, aided by violent events and
war, from the depressed to the admired, and non-
toughness becomes a source of shame. I think Gol-
lancz might have recognized this in his denunciation
of the growth of callousness. As a simple test of the
rôle of such writing in the spread of abnormal im-
pulses and in the satisfaction of the demand which it
in part creates, it is worth looking at a dozen cover-
illustrations from such publications. At least three-
quarters of these will be found in general to have a
quite undisguisedly sadistic content. The preoccupa-
tion with shootings and floggings is not a concen-
tration upon violence so much as a concentration on
one kind of violence, the kind which we know to
be intimately tied up with pruriency.

However, it is only fair to say that a great deal of the
apparatus of these books is repeated by, and possibly
derived from, more serious work. The activities of
the amateur psychologists in surrealism come closest
to justifying 'Fraxi's' attack on de Sade, and it is
difficult to uphold much of this work as social criti-
cism. It is important for writers to realize how
deeply they are influenced by the moral and psycho-
logical climate of their age, and the surrealists tended
to reflect the very pattern they were attempting to
satirize. But the sexiness of surrealism is so consci-

ous and so laboured, much of it being studiously got up from textbooks of analysis, that it is less important, to my mind, as a formative influence on literature than the almost helpless acceptance of the sexual bully in the serious novel. I wish to make it quite clear that I am not attacking writers who share the appetites and tendencies of their age, but only attempting to analyse the origins of their artistic material. I think that the parallelism between the Hemingway hero, who consists chiefly of appetites and *cojones*, and the truncheon-swinging hero of the boys' papers, already pointed out by Orwell, is definite and instructive. It does not indicate something wrong with Hemingway, but something wrong with the social-psychical pattern. The truth seems to be that while sadism is latent in all societies, as it is in individuals, its invasion of literature and public life marks the termination of a society. An infertile and disruptive thing, it acts as a terminal infection. We have seen two such booms in cruelty, one prior to the collapse of Rome, and one, much reinforced by monasticism and the Christian conception of sin, towards the end of the period of ecclesiocracy. The evocative force is twofold: the assertion of power, and the canalization of brutality to support it, which pretorianism, fascism and the papacy of the Inquisition shared; and the personal frustration which power produces, making the sadistic pattern of conduct articulate in a desire to smash things, including oneself.

Village communities go in for cockfighting and occasionally the cruder acts of violence, but only urban societies on the point of collapse demand circuses upon the same level of necessity as they demand

bread. And the literary toughness is in itself a similar revolt against impotence, a similar demand for circuses, based upon the flatness which writers find in comparing non-tough themes with the world they live in and must interpret. One has to regard this process from the viewpoint of biology, not ethics or literary criticism, since they are internal, physical forces which are at work in the determination of the kind of imagery and material which the artist finds himself selecting.

It is a point of some literary importance that sadistic writing is almost always 'powerful'. It produces an obscure reflex effect on the reader which is almost an abortive orgasm, just as salivation at the smell of food is an abortive digestion. Its effect is enhanced by a certain ritualistic pattern—those who indulge in cruel practices for sexual satisfaction generally demand a highly artificial and rigid ritual, often very odd to the observer; hunting for sport is stylized by garments, set routines, and customs in a very comparable manner: legal punishment follows another of these patterns, as anyone who realizes the loving care expended on the book of instruction to hangmen and the specifications for corporal punishment in prisons and some other institutions can vouch. In literature this stylization is equally a component of what critics describe as 'powerful' writing. It is one of the fascinations of literary criticism to notice how true to type psychological patterns such as these run in the most various individuals. Accordingly the cult of stylized violence is in part due to the fact that, once experienced, this psychical bowel-rumbling which 'powerful' writing produces becomes an addiction among readers, and the writer who eschews pathological

toughness on grounds of public health finds it hard to compete economically, and in his own esteem, with the less 'sentimental' group of writers.

The techniques underlying 'powerful' writing, a secret ambition of most novelists, range from a deliberate cultivation of sadistic images to a deliberate creation of strain in the use of words. Genuine power, as exemplified in Zola or Flaubert, is almost wholly a matter of dramatic sense, creative use of imagery, and imaginative detail. The bed of white china asters in *Le Dérèglement*, which is progressively turned to red by the buckets of bloodstained water from the dressing-post, is worth volumes of electrically-charged language. The spurious techniques of securing power are the hard-boiled attitude, the use of telegraphese, and the evocation of sadistic imagery in the audience. The power of handling violent events is essential if one is going to write about modern Europe at all. But a sequence of violent events presented uncritically and without form, and interlarded with 'buggers' and 'bastards' to startle the Citizens, is a product of violence, not a comment on it.

6 · *Realism, Fantasy, and Symbolism*

NEXT TO THE INCREASED RANGE OF SENSORY experience which both audiences and writers have derived from science, and which partly compensates for their loss of many sensory experiences which most human beings were formerly able to reach, the widened scope of writing due to psycho-analytical research has done most to expand the field of literary techniques. Technically competent writers have always known that certain combinations of imagery produced emotional effects, which were hard to localize but fairly regular in any audience. Psychoanalysis has explained much of this mechanism, and it is now possible to predict the effects of a symbolic technique with some accuracy if you know the audience well enough. Any knowledge is good, but it destroys the literary feeble-minded. We have had novels written with a copy of Freud propped up in front of the author, we have still a tedious mass of pseudo-science, and an even more tedious mass of books by lunatics who think they are psychologists and by neurotics who think they are lunatics. The literary magazines are full of the praises of schizophrenia.

I think Freud would have understood this, and not found it in any way alarming. Evolution, a similarly revolutionary discovery, affected some people in the same way. The really bad thing about this *kitsch*-psychology in writing is that it provides an easy way out of the responsibility-problem. It has produced a re-

crudescence of what is sometimes called Gothicism—in this case the de Sade-Lautreamont version of Monk Lewis or *Udolpho*—and a large part of the literary talent of England at present goes in bad fantasy or bad madhouse-cell-ism. It is my personal opinion that the return of physiology into the study of mind, while it cannot shake the solid conclusions of the psychology of the unconscious, may do something to choke off ill-informed lay psychologists in the literary field, and we shall get back to the intelligent use of the new knowledge as a literary weapon.

With the advent of an intelligent insight into symbolism, realism as we knew it before the new psychology must be reconsidered, because we now know that any imaginative narration exists both as a direct statement of events and as a reflection of conscious or unconscious forces dictating the imagery in which it is presented. We choose our images either deliberately to create an effect or as a result of our own inherited or acquired personality make-up.

I do not decry fantasy as a genre, only fantasy which is made an excuse for irresponsibility or non-responsibility, a failure to grasp the real world, and an easy escape into an arbitrary one. That is not the fantasy of writers like Kafka, who went through purgatory in writing it, or fantasy like Read's *Green Child*, or *Alice in Wonderland*, or, on another level, *Candida*, nor the fantasy of a talented psycho-path like de Sade. The fantasy at a cheap rate is almost wholly done as a device, designed to startle, and costing the author nothing.

Fantasy of the sound kind is a natural response of indignation or disgust when protest can do no more, when by holding a mirror to the monkey you have

failed to convince him he has a tail, or it is a kindly, spontaneous outgrowth of yourself. Realism, the treatment of events as they appear, is the method which appeals most directly in a period when events are apocalyptic in character and scale. It would be difficult to invent more perfect or moving tragic patterns than those which actually exist. Realism is more, however, than reportage. At the moment the imaginative writer finds it hard to compete with the eye-witness. The other qualities which he needs besides descriptive power are a sense of dramatic construction, the power of exact observation and of drawing conclusions, trained intelligence, and a knowledge of the detail involved. Since the only groups which still persist tend to be technical groups, and since each one knows increasingly little of the others, one form of discipline in realism is the acquisition of an exact knowledge both of techniques and of their effect on the living-habits of those who practise them. All the sciences contribute to this method, especially psychology and social anthropology, but scientific observation without the basic sense of human community, and the impartiality toward bogus causes that goes with it, will never make a realist. The real greatness of Zola lay in four things: his sense of the dramatic, his powers of acquiring information, his ability to cohere and analyse the whole pattern of a society, and his steady, reasonable combination of unblinkered, unoptimistic objectivity with an equally consistent human sympathy. These are the qualities of all great realism, even the form which presents itself implicitly, like the realism of Camus. We are already familiar with bogus realism, the realism of the distorting-mirror, with its combi-

nation of Zolaesque description with hideous Huns or heroic Liberators. These figures are no more realistic than Punch. All human beings are potentially hideous and potentially heroic, and explicitly both by turns. Atrocities and acts of heroism are simply the normal currency of action in the type of society which exists to-day. Realism in its socially critical form has never reached a higher level in literature than *L'Attaque du Moulin*, where it is put into its proper perspective in relation to fantasy and the fantastic.

Realism of another and less impartial kind has a wide vogue as a corollary of Marxism, and has been very largely and, I think, successfully developed in the pre-war Russian novel. While it was respectable to regard Russia as an ally, the English middle class read Sholokhov pretty steadily and seemed to enjoy him. Library copies were quite worn.

I feel there is an explanation for this in Sholokhov's whole artistic purpose. Either there is a quality in his writing which alone of the post-revolutionary writers enabled him to get through the hide of the English novel-reading middle class, or there is a thread of recognizable continuity between his writing and the work of the golden-age Russian novelists who were known and accepted. I feel that almost certainly both reasons operated.

The first impression which any of Sholokhov's historical novels leaves upon one is of an essential naïvety, which is quite fundamental to his work. There is a quality of this kind in almost all translated Russian writing, which is almost certainly inherent in the language-change: and there is a second factor, a simplicity in presenting incident, which is a part of the

manners of Russian prose, either by tradition or as a quality of the language (I cannot read it, and I doubt if one could guess which is true without the power to compare). It is this apparent naïvety in Dostoievsky which some English writers find infuriating and describe as stylistic suicide. But on reading more of Sholokhov, one comes to feel that the naïvety, which in Dostoievsky is only apparent, a stylistic device, is far more real in the Cossack novels. Sholokhov is not presenting you with the minds of simple people in a simple form, but deliberately cultivating genuine simpleness himself, partly the simplicity of an artist who has to maintain a continual ideological defensive, and partly as a studied method of speech, depending on the consciousness of a large enthusiastic semi-literate public. Accordingly the incident is throughout brought to the level of the child. Events are seen in context by short notes in simple words, describing the importance of this or that battle or person. Ideologies are assumed. There is a hint of the villain and even of the 'ever after' formula. Wherever there is horror, and Sholokhov is not squeamish, one encounters that sudden hardening and falling out of focus by which the child and the Russian often protects himself. The balance of this mechanism varies with the writer's sensitivity, with his childishness. In Gogol it operates continually, and one alternates between realism and a sort of sub-stratum of ambiguous imagery which might, if it were seen too closely, be horrible. In Sholokhov one can detect a coming horrible incident by the stiffening of all the characters into pasteboard a few lines beforehand. The Cossacks sit talking—an aeroplane comes over and bombs them. The

building falls in a cloud of rose-coloured dust (at this point the figures become wooden) and out crawls a hideously wounded man, dragging his entrails; the suffering of the man is unreal, just as in the real seeing of such an episode it becomes unreal until a few hours afterwards one remembers what one has seen. It is this quality of a nation whose immediate sensitiveness is probably greater than ours that makes the attempted realism of Russian atrocity propaganda so ineffective over here; the writers are taken in and horrified by the very tale they are writing, and to protect themselves they allow it to drop out of focus. *Comrade Genia* (written, I should say on internal evidence, by Sholokhov and/or Ilya Ehrenburg) is a case in point. It has none of the lip-smacking of most English efforts in the same direction. The authors were frightened with their own tale, not because it was real, but because it was a part of their imagination, and Sholokhov occasionally finds himself in the same position. When Krivosheikov is hanged, and inefficiently hanged so that his feet touch the ground, Sholokhov suddenly concentrates on the grotesque features of his figure, face, and attitude, using the grotesqueness as a means of bearing the intolerable. Sholokhov is a realist, but to judge him in terms of Zola would be unfair. He is never on the offensive, as Zola continually was. His art is a defensive, post-revolutionary thing. He is too far influenced by it in his sympathy with working men and peasants for the sympathy to be objective, and he has to be careful, exactly as Steinbeck has to keep an eye on Hollywood. The miners of *Germinal* are no less terrible and foolish than the owners are terrible and foolish; the Cossacks and peasants of Sholokhov are foolish

at times, terrible at times, but never victims either of their antecedents or their environment. I know no Cossacks, but I feel on the balance of fact that *La Terre* is a more accurate picture of *humanity*, as opposed to people. Sholokhov never combines that illuminating hatred of Man with his love of men, which would make him critical and objective. His realism is less fearlessly whole than Zola's.

It is hard to decide if this is 'popular' art. It is urbanized, as most Western novels are. None of the literary bums and hobos of this country who have taken in vain the name of popular art have understood what elements the artistic side of it involved. Sholokhov has partly realized, and made his style to suit these elements. Much of the success of the Cossack novels here depends on their strong and interesting story, which transcends both the translation and the haze of interchangeable unpronounceable names. The root of form in popular art is story-telling, and this is less a novel than a story. The second factor is that cultivated naïvety which is both witty and perceptive, the immemorial defence of the small man and the peasant against bullies, swindlers and bounders, a mixture of genuine simplicity and of craft, of fantasy and of semi-cynical realism. The world becomes simple, a child's world, full of simple and uncritically seen emotions, frequently grotesque, and frequently poignant, but never sentimental, any more than children are sentimental. One critic found it unconvincing, I remember, that one of Sholokhov's Cossacks was jumping on his lover's face on page 200 and passionately embracing her twenty pages later. The astounding thing about this in Sholokhov's context is that it is convincing. One ought to imagine how

Lawrence would have handled it, and how horribly bogus it would have been. The world Sholokhov depicted is very largely the world of the Ballads, even if his audience is urban. The only section of English literature where this particular blend of grotesque diablerie, violence, horseplay and realism occurs is the ballad. One might add that for popular art to exist one requires a people for it to represent, possessing a measure of common pride and culture, which explains its failure in contemporary England, with its persistence in Wales. The representative, as opposed to creative, art based upon *our* urban and suburban society is that of Celine, not Sholokhov. Celine still has the mixture of craft and limpidity which is a sign of dispossession, but his view of humanity is nearer Zola's, and he is murderously cynical in assessing their emotions. The hero of *Mort à Crédit* is a bastard and a bounder, but he is also horribly representative and entirely real. For him the grotesque—the infatuated landlady's daughter and her ridiculous suicide; father shooting off his revolver in the cellar to relieve his feelings—is a refuge exactly as it is for Sholokhov.

I said that the key to realism was the power to control violent incident and to prevent disintegration. Zola achieves this by his mastery of form and of motifs—the machine-beast motif in *Germinal*, or the railway in *La Bête Humaine*—and Sholokhov achieves it in long historical plots quite as straggling as Eckmann's and Chattrien's, by his technical ingenuity in interchanging between the novel form and the pure narrative. Work in a foreign language is extremely deceptive, and it is hard to say if this type of writing is really better than the very high competence of

Northwest Passage—it carries rather more comprehension of issues outside the narrative, perhaps.

The subsequent story of Sholokhov is very similar to that of Steinbeck or the other successful Americans—it ends in a retreat into conformity, the war propaganda stories, the general acceptance of the *status quo*. I do not want to reopen the Zoschenko controversy. There is a very strong tendency for this particular type of literary repression to be publicized as if it were confined to Russia, and used as anti-communist propaganda, and as a means of concealing the fact that pressure on the artist is a direct social consequence of all megalopolitan societies, whether tyrannical or *kitsch*-democratic. The position of the artist in Russia is no more obtrusively regulated now than at the time of the highest levels of the Russian novel when most of the chief practitioners spent periods in Siberia. Perhaps the most instructive political conclusion is that the advent of a change in power-structure alters the position of art very little, and far less than purely sociological pressures such as those of urbanism or asocial living.

Ehrenburg is another writer who shows the pattern of political and national influence, and who has been destroyed by it, becoming one of the least savoury professional mouthpieces of the lot. *The Fall of Paris*, written during the war, is interesting because it is a direct attempt to write a French novel. The best method of approaching it is to compare it with *Les Jours d'Espoir*. It is better than Aragon's *Passengers of Destiny*, another pretentious work of destiny by a rather similar literary personality—Ehrenburg's perceptions are emphatically not French, but his book has coherence and scale.

There is a sharp division in Russian novels to-day, between the megalopolitan product and the local, which has something of a decentralized peasant tradition to draw on. The novel is a big-city form into which peasant traditions incorporate badly, but the dichotomy between centralized tyranny in the city and decentralized small communities ranging down to primitive tribes appears continually in Russian literature, more so since the Revolution, with the spread of literate and centralizing influences to remote cultures and the transition from a hereditary to a revolutionary ruling class. There would have been a similar picture in America if, in about 1860, the Red Indians had suddenly become literate, but America has not the coherent traditions in politics and literature, the tradition in particular of the clique of paternalists who act as a buffer between an Eastern culture they are somewhat inclined to conceal and a Western which they distrust.

Narrative realism is perhaps most a problem in the period novel, where without special knowledge the reader has no criterion of what is real. Historically, novels have appealed very naturally to Marxist realists whose philosophy was a philosophy of history, and the Marxist novels produced outside Russia are solidly historical when they are not direct reportage of modern life and conditions. This is a form which, I know, many writers distrust even when they write it, because they know that the longer the time-distance which separates them from their subject, the more grotesque the result would look to a contemporary—imagine a Carthaginian reading *Salammô*, or a novelist of A.D. 2500 or 3500 writing about the Blitz. The tendency is to do one of

two things: to use period, even detailed and well-informed period, as a background for fantasy and colour, as Flaubert did, or to make it a vehicle for modern attitudes. It is perfectly easy to defend both these approaches. Robert Graves, who has taken more pains and shown a better historical insight than most, seems to me to be setting out of deliberate choice not only to let us see what Roman life was actually like, but to make us realize that Roman emperors were men whose background was different from that of present-day politicians, but whose reactions to it were fundamentally comparable. His preface covers the whole of this problem, so far as it relates to the *Claudius* novels, very perceptively. What he says there gives us a clue to the causes behind Koestler's failure to make his Spartacus a credible figure. Leslie Mitchell, who wrote a crude and bloodshot novel about the same period of Roman history, does better in carrying his reader, partly because he has obviously read *Salammbô* and wants to exploit the colour-and-brutality vein of fantasy, rather than Roman history, and because, whatever his defects as a writer, he does not try to give Romans the attitudes of urban England, or the legacy of obsessional doubt which Koestler interprets to the full. The pulp novel, lacking Koestler's culture, and in most ways as crude as a twopenny blood, has a vitality which the 'serious' novel misses. It is because the worst historical novels are so often the best that I think they preoccupy and worry writers and critics. Many of us stick to writing contemporary history.

Modern historical-realism, dealing with current patterns and events, has produced two peculiar techniques. The problem is one of unities—the writer

with a definite field to cover has to devise a means of getting his viewpoint-character into every circle and every event he feels moved to incorporate. Either he chooses heroes who cover an enormous and unlikely amount of ground, in the manner of the early picaresque hero (Sinclair), or he is tempted to prolong the story over a series of generations, and expends nearly all the momentum of the original impulse in the early stages (*The Forsyte Saga*, *Men of Goodwill*), and has less personal comprehension of the events which occurred after his most receptive age was passed. Readers who do not write, and writers who write short novels expressing a clear-cut and self-contained sequence of thought, probably do not realize the terrific boredom of working on a single set of characters for more than seventy thousand words. Only an eye to reward, or a superhuman sense of construction prevent this sort of undertaking, where one has nobody, not even a publisher, to act as foreman and progress-chaser, from becoming a damnable chore to the writer himself, though he can sometimes conceal it from the reader who is not too careful. The vast novel-sequence is bound to sink, as it is sinking, out of the first line of technical excellence, and be inherited by the good second-rater, who has the patience to do it, and whose personality is not as likely to act in short bursts as that of the primarily creative, intuitive type.

For an instance of a historical realism which is fully successful, we have to go outside the definition of the novel as a product of Western urbanism to the Chinese novel, largely because two hundred years in ancient China brought little external change in manners. The more febrile periods of history, such as our

own or the tail-end of the Roman imperial culture, has always produced an intense yearning for contact with societies which knew how to live and which made individual living and daily life an end in itself—societies which did not carry in their structure the makings of an anxiety state for each of their citizens. The books which have permanent solidarity, often apart from their general literary merit, are frequently records of such societies or of individuals who would have been at home in them: Pepys and the *Odyssey* on the one hand, Burton and Defoe on the other. It is to this contrast with our own times that the spontaneity and permanence of such writers as Pepys seem to owe their appeal, and with Pepys I would rank the Chinese novel *Chin P'ing Mei*. Written in about 1593, it describes the decay of a Chinese house two hundred years before, and it is available in two translations, one of them abridged. Clement Egerton, who first produced it in English, was drawn originally by its anthropological interest, but surrendered to the book as a work of literature before he was half-way through. Lin Yutang describes it as the prototype of the Chinese pornographic novel, a description which seems unfair, for its morality is of the most rigid, and all the wenching and lechery produces its inexorable personal effect. Moreover, the 'pornography' is no more than the sexual aspect of a general and civilized enjoyment of life which we abuse because we envy it.

The story is that of a successful rake, an official of the Yamen who is over-fond of graft, women, wine, food, and the other addictions of officials, and of the seven women whom he marries, from diverse but equally improper motives. The story, insofar as there

is one, is a leisurely account of the life of the household, dominated by Lotus, the Becky Sharp whom he marries, after assisting her to dispose of an elderly husband, and who enslaves him in spite of his bursts of temper, his idiotic jealousies, his consistent infidelity (the only consistent thing about him, part of a thoroughgoing selfishness and gourmandism which is the driving-force behind everything he does), by the skilful way in which she manipulates her own sexual attractions. Lotus holds on to Hsi-Men Ch'ing by a sheer Delilah-like instinct for his weak spots, his vanity and his sensuality. The moral, that crime does not pay, works itself out as slowly and as imperceptibly as it does in real life. Every new piece of dirty work, every new piece of graft, lechery, and intrigue is paid for in full, not by the gods but by the progressive collapse of Hsi-Men's household and public credit, by the loss of his most valued asset, his potency, and finally, when he has died a picturesque and thoroughly well-earned death, by the killing of Lotus by a family avenger. There is no comment on Chinese society as such, and no reformism, but over the shoulder of the personal avenger there suddenly descends the foreign invasion, the wiping-clean of the slate, the abolition of the whole corrupt order of pettifogging officials. The province fragments into private lives, the author's real concern, and we are left with the certitude that if one odious administration of carpet-baggers has gone, another has come, and the process, like the Buddhist wheel of existence, has begun over again.

But if life at this time differed from our own, it is strikingly like it, because all the actors are essentially human. No medico could fail to be amused by the

treatments prescribed for one of Hsi-Men's wives, and the exhibition of conflicting diagnoses—we have been here before, even in an age of rational medicine:

'I have read nearly everything that is written about medicine,' said Dr Chao. 'My fingers are able to discern the most profound workings of the pulse . . .'
Old Master Ho listened attentively. 'May I ask what is the first thing to be done in the consideration of the patient's case?' he said . . .

Dr Chao then begins to talk theory, with one eye on the qualifications of Ho, with whom he is supposed to be consulting, and concludes by a guess at the history which is very wide of the mark. 'You are quite wrong', says the husband. 'Be very careful, and your fee shall be correspondingly large.' Chao sends up another kite, nearer the mark, and when he is told the diagnosis, says: 'Just as I thought', and orders a tremendous blunderbuss prescription. The minute he has gone, Ho tells Hsi-Men in confidence that the man is a quack, and orders something different. The patient takes neither prescription, and calls in another doctor. This is a Shavian and anti-medical skit, but there is enough truth in it to sting. We have all been at a loss, we have all tried to gain time, and found someone else called in, unprofessionally, but rather naturally.

The chief attraction of the book to me is in its quiet, not to say crafty, acceptance of contemporary convention and contemporary religious apparatus, an acceptance so naïve that its refusal to comment is a satire in itself. This suppleness attracts almost as much as the perpetual state of dynamic judgment in Tolstoy or Zola, because it provides, like Pepys's can-

dour, a translucent medium through which lives and people can be seen—the corruption and chicanery of the local yamen, the skilful removal of officials who retain a misplaced sense of equity, the conceit of the men who reduce women to the status of furniture, and the utter captivity which the women impose on them in revenge. The book swarms with the materials of moral judgments, and yet those it makes are artificial and are clearly a concession to the times. The real morals are the morals of a disillusioned but quite unmalicious social biology—men are like this, officials are corrupt, women do enjoy paramours, and anyone who denies the observed social facts in pursuit of a febrile delusion of progress, is making a monumental ass of himself. Against it all there is a series of Victorian but highly farcical particular judgments: the rakish Hsi-Men Ch'ing dies of priapism after an overdose of Strengthening Medicine: Lotus is disembowelled by the brother of her murdered husband, who then 'entered a monastery in the remote West and soon after became'—as all men of principles and action become—'a bandit'.

The plot is unhurried, built up with the phlegmatic care and persistence with which the story follows the contours of real life. There is a recapitulative inset at the end, rather after the fashion of Dostoevsky, in which an old monk, the incarnate Buddha in disguise, parades the deceased characters, forgives them (they could not help it, after all), and informs them of their new incarnation. We get an intimate acquaintance with each person which extends from his private peculations to his favourite position in intercourse—a moral nudity as complete as that of Pepys, and more remarkable since no detail of any character

is omitted and nothing jars. The author follows his protagonists like a separative soul, nothing escapes record. The writer is not ashamed or shocked at the sight of any human activity; he is a man and all things human interest him. In his accounts of personal sexuality, one of the most revealing points in any character, he was free of the handicap which oppressed Joyce and Miller, who need to keep yelling, 'You see, I'm not shocked!'—he has the medical, level eye which loves human beings without sentimentalizing Man, and criticizes Man without hating and sneering at men.

I do not think that by reading this book one can learn much about writing, as writing exists to-day. But in a bad time it helps one to look back and forward to periods when to enjoy living is not a crime, and to prevent others enjoying it not the acme of civic virtue, before the curses of Augustine and Henry Ford came home to roost—the level which all humanity, between its paroxysms, finds.

7 · Conclusion

LOOK AT THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE AS A reader, and see if you can suggest any third way of interpreting it. Realism or a form of fantasy based on realism: every aspect of it cries out for one or other, and your selection will be a product of your personality—realism if you understand and wish to analyse, fantasy if you cannot detach your vision from the indignation and pity which it produces. The modern novel is patently not succeeding in coping with the material which is being presented to it, because like everyone else the novelist is becoming saturated, both in his sense of tragedy and in his capacity for indignation or for analysis. Zola was able only to contain the general landscape of early industrialism in his novels by an effort which distorted their artistic structure.

At the present moment the literary interpretation of events is as much out of control as the events themselves. The real literature of events is tending to pass out of fiction into the letters one gets from Berlin or Tokyo, or into individuals who are themselves walking fiction, on such a scale that one gets tired of them. The problems of selection and coherence in a mass of events which covers the first days of the Russian occupation of Berlin; the last days of the German occupation of Paris; Hitler and his doxy cremated in the ruins of the *Reichskanzlerei* among old petrol tins; the buffoons and charlatans of the peace conference, and the incredible backdrop of partly-

opened and eviscerated buildings, is soluble only by these two techniques, the dream-approach that obscures its reality, and the analytic approach that recognizes and isolates the common principle.

For me at any rate, the solution which presents itself is to concentrate on the fixed-points, as one might look away from a fire to allow one's sight to settle down—the soldier in his pillbox watching Hitler's body burn, disliking the smoke, wondering if he will get a sanitary fatigue afterwards, and whether his wife has been killed, or the thoughts inside the stuffed-shirt who holds the door open for Bevin and Molotoff and can think what he likes because his stuffed-shirt is a kind of protective clothing—he can handle this infected material without damage: not the viewpoint of the man who is going to be executed, or even of the firing-squad, who are likely to be infantile and rowdy all that morning to get up spirit, but of the tradesman who gets a dirty piece of paper with 'Boards, pine, 6; please show this to storekeeper', and a little drawing in sucked indelible pencil giving the coffin dimensions, as if it were a table or a box.

To this approach, the difficulty of covering ground is not present, because someone is there at every big crime and every big swindle, and because he is a man you know roughly what he is thinking and how he feels. Instead of your own armour of prejudice and rationalization, you can add his—he has been told to save his Fatherland from the Jews instead of the Germans—he has the same touching faith in Molotoff that you have in Bevin-Churchill—or the same grouse about chianti that you have about vegetable prices. Being a genuine human being, who can

be swindled or driven into excesses of any kind, but has two legs and no hoofs or claws, you can make contact with him at any moment when it is he, not his corporate self, who is acting. He is your mouth-piece, or more accurately you are his. You can assess his prejudices while doing your best to share none of them. Richard Church once suggested that as a scientist I had no right to be angry. I disagree. Anger is a perfectly proper artistic motive, and science and art have a place for it. But it cannot be anger against single people. That is too dangerous and will not work. Nor against nations, because that is a form of lunacy. The only anger which remains is that which the Prophets called jealousy for God. For 'God', read 'humanity'. Every time a writer opens his mouth he is the voice of someone voiceless.

Do not be taken in by talk about craftsmanship. The most highly-skilled branch of journalism at the moment is that which caters for *Peg's Paper* or *The Wizard*—it is an honest trade unrelated to literature. Craftmanship in the novel is not the technique which one learns at night school. Its antecedent is not the desire to be a writer but the desire to write *this*. The radio mechanic learns electronics to earn a living, the prisoner of war because it is vital to him if he is going to escape. The technique of the writer who is obsessed by the world and by responsibilities in himself is acquired by reading, by direct study of those through whom he feels himself influenced and whose works are generally the original source of his awareness. He does not learn to write so that he can 'write', but because without the necessary tools he cannot dig his way out of prison.

It is both stupid and unjust to despise and depreciate the

trade novelist. He is simply the man who is lucky enough not to be in prison, who is under no compulsions, and whose innate ability is often a level, pleasing force of which he is aware, manifesting itself in a quiet observative hobby like angling or bird-watching. The wider reality of biology can be reached, and may be best reached, through watching birds, or a taste for big-game stalking. The high-temperature levels of the process of artistic expression can be reached perfectly well through professionalism, because professional novel-writing, if it entails any observation, progressively extends and enlarges the writer. What strikes me about the not-first-rate and the not-accepted-as-first-rate novel in this country is that it is rarely very bad, and often has resources behind it which the accepted highbrow lacks. I am thinking of people like Seton Merriman or Francis Brett Young, about whom critical essays are not written until some time after their death. The critical decision on who is to be taken seriously is grossly unreliable. Charlatans by the dozen find acceptance, and writers of unquestionable seriousness are passed over. I have yet to see a weekly or monthly publish an intelligent appraisal of R. C. Hutchinson or Joyce Cary, while there are 'seconds' who are lucky: Bates for instance, a very competent writer, who makes the critical grade while Brett Young doesn't.

I think I know what I mean by first-rateness—it is a combination of scope, responsibility and impact, the last of these being beyond analysis. In view of the badness of reviewing at the moment, the cliques and clagues, the boys and the barkers, the reader has a set duty not to heed reviewing estimates of seriousness.

Unless he reviews himself, he can have no idea of the speed at which notices are written, or of the undercurrents behind them. The reviewer who is a novelist himself may be reliable, but only if he has no personal feud with his subject. A writer following the literary press with any care can predict his reception at once—he can tell exactly the sort of noise that each review will make. He can even say, ‘Binks reviews for *Wear and Tear*—he thinks I’m a Catholic, so he’ll categorize me as serious but wrong; *Red Ruin* will like the realism but not the anti-Marxism—beta plus there; an ideological rude noise from the *Literary Supplement*; not enough psychology for *Skyline*; too much politics for *Jack o’ Lantern*: I might make it.’ If it comes to that, I am a reviewer myself, and any novelist who studies form can predict whether I am likely to be prejudiced for or against him. You can see my prejudice and my theories in this book. The whole thing is too big to give a damn for reviews, but the writer can learn from criticism he can respect. Ninety per cent of the printed matter evoked by a given book is uncritical flattery or uncritical carping. From the residue, however severely it mauls your bad work, you can learn. It is sheer affectation to pretend that writers are uninfluenced by criticism; but they are only able to profit from sensible criticism.

This is our problem: to present in terms of an existing and semi-traditional form the interpretation of the world as it is, and the nature and limitations of human character and human social activity. Working in a framework of form and in a period of history which directs our art to a fragmentary audience of individuals, we have the unique opportunity of ad-

dressing them as individuals and of making our interpretations explicit. Our form has many of the characters of symphonic music with the added property of explicit meaning, something of the individuality of lyric combined with the resources we have derived from knowledge and technology, and something of the primitive appeal of narrative. Whether we are able to influence human conduct will depend very largely upon the number of people in a given asocial society who react by rational aggression towards that society rather than by irrational aggression towards their fellow individuals. The social rôle of the novel will depend very largely, in coming years, upon the persistence of sufficient rationally disobedient individuals to make novel-writing of the kind I have described possible.

While interpretation rather than an attempt to convince is the chief object of art, the novel is more apt than any other literary form to exert direct pressure upon the growth and forming of ideas, and it will do so whether we intend that or not. To that extent, the future of the novel as a social force is dictated by the humanity and intelligence of its readers, and with that in mind the present-day novel is written. What will happen to it in the end, I am not qualified to predict. But because of the essential humanity which a writer must possess to write major novels, I am confident that it will play a large part in the events which precede the end of asociality, and should it pass out of currency as a form, it will be replaced by the unanimous literature of tyranny or the spontaneous social literature of a free society, depending upon how far its readers are able to share and imbibe the responsibility of its best practitioners.

